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ABSTRACT

The Transitional Class Program is a joint effort of the New York City Board of Education and the Community School Districts to provide a positive learning experience for children in their early school years who have fallen behind their peers. This preliminary report describes the program and examines its impact on student attendance. Student attitudes toward the program, staff development, program administration, and program costs are also discussed briefly. It is concluded that despite some problems with supply shortages and low parent participation, the program is responding well to the needs of underachievers. (EB)

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OEE: EVALUATION REPORT

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON TRANSITIONAL CLASSES

New York City Public Schools

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Office of Educational Evaluation

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Preface

As educators, as government representatives, as concerned citizens, we want evaluation to tell us whether expensive social programs are working. To be useful, an evaluation study must examine program effectiveness. In doing this, evaluation must meet standards of objectivity, and it must define effectiveness in ways that accurately embody the goals of the program. A study that meets these criteria has a good chance of being accepted as valid by readers with a wide range of interests and perspectives.

In this preliminary report, we examine meticulously the impact of the newly created Transitional Class Program on student attendance. This is a first available measure -- some student achievement data will be available later in the school year and the most crucial data, related to the students' subsequent adjustment in school, will be counted only in subsequent years. In this report, preliminary "hard data" on attendance are supplemented with the observations of evaluation staff, a review of program records, and an analysis of teacher and parent questionnaires developed by the United Federation of Teachers and the United Parents Association, respectively. These additional sources are important, especially since this is a new program and the support that it has engendered is, in itself, an operational value.

Many individuals in the Office of Educational Evaluation have assisted in the preparation of this report. Sharon Walker, head of the Transitional Class Evaluation Unit, assembled the core data, and she and her staff were ably assisted by Charles Troob and Rick Guttenberg in the piecing together of this document. It is the policy of the Office of Educational Evaluation to seek comments on all public reports; these should be sent to the Director, Office of Educational Evaluation, Board of Education, 110 Livingston Street, Brooklyn, New York, 11201.

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Dr. Alan Blumner
Director (Acting)

In the Fall of 1978, the New York Public School System began a program of "transitional classes" for holdover pupils in grades one, two, and three. The program attempts to prevent these children from getting caught in a cycle of repeated failure, by providing intensive and personal instructional assistance. The object of the program is to stabilize the academic adjustment of these students so that they can maintain steady progress in the elementary curriculum.

The need for massive intervention is clear. In the Spring of 1978, 21.5% of the sixth graders were more than two years below grade level in reading. Children who are this far behind are very likely to find school to be a frustrating and humiliating experience, and their prognosis for later improvement is poor. There are, of course, a number of programs already in existence whose aim is to ensure that children from all backgrounds are adequately educated in the early grades. These programs, in their present form, have simply not succeeded in their goals. By the third grade, 29.1% of tested children were a year or more below grade level, and thus eligible to be held over.

The Transitional Class Program is a joint effort of the Board of Education and the Community School Districts. The Program's central features are a reduction in class size to between 15 and 20 children (versus 32 normally), and a commitment to utilize instructional strategies and materials suited to children experiencing difficulties with the normal curriculum. The Board has provided $5.4 million for teachers' salaries, allocated to the districts on a formula basis, related to the actual number of holdovers in grades one, two and three, at the rate of $10,500 per transitional class. Roughly 2% of the overall allocation was reserved for a central coordination unit to provide training and to identify instructional materials. As originally anticipated, the districts have supplemented this amount in order to assign experienced teachers who are entitled to higher salaries. The districts also agreed

to assign a staff 'liaison' person and some have agreed to provide for coverage when transitional class teachers have preparation periods or workshops. Some districts have even provided staff for additional transitional classes above those supported by the Central Board allocation. Based on some preliminary calculations, it is estimated that districts have contributed resources in excess of $2.5 million to the program.

The aim of the Transitional Class Program is to provide a positive learning experience in the early school years for children who have fallen far behind their peers. Children who appear to be underachievers are traditionally either held over, in which case they must repeat the entire curriculum, or promoted to a class which performs well above their abilities, and from which they are "pulled out" for remedial help -- if such help is available at all. A transitional class, small, individualized, and consisting entirely of holdovers, could well be a better alternative for these children. It is hoped that the experience in the transitional class will help children adapt to the lower grade placement with confidence, and that they will learn at a satisfactory rate thereafter. For children who fall just below the standard for promotion, the transitional class may provide the boost necessary to get them back on grade during the school year.

Attendance Rates: Early Indicators of Success

In January, data were collected on the attendance records of children in transitional classes. It had been reported by a number of observers that children in these classes had a more positive attitude towards school this year, and that this was reflected in improved attendance. Another reason for being concerned with attendance rates is the obvious connection between absence and failure to learn.

The Office of Educational Evaluation sent professional staff in late January to 33 schools, randomly selected from those which have transitional classes, to collect attendance records for transitional class children. The teachers' roll

books were the source of data for this school year, and individual pupil cumulative record cards were the source of data on last year's attendance for these same children. The data were used to compute attendance rates for this year and last year for children in transitional classes in each school. Children were included in the analysis if records were available for them for at least part of last year, as well as for this year's attendance in the transitional class.

The results are quite striking. The attendance rates for transitional class students rose by an average of 3.88 percentage points from a mean of 84.36% to a mean of 88.24%. There were increases of at least one percentage point in 24 schools, and increases of at least five points in 10 schools. Only 2 schools registered attendance declines greater than one point for transitional class children. Another way of looking at these data is that the absence rate dropped from 15.64% to 11.76% -- a decline of 25% in the number of absences. What makes these findings particularly dramatic is that, typically, an increase in absenteeism would be anticipated among children who have been held over and who are returned to the sort of educational setting in which they have experienced failure (See Table I).

Ideally, data would have been compared for the first months of this year with data for the first months of last year--rather than all of last year. However, individual pupil attendance for last year was easily available only for the whole year. There is no reason to think that these findings are biased, however. As Table II demonstrates, system-wide attendance rates for September through December of 1977 were remarkably similar to attendance rates for the whole year. Table II also demonstrates a system-wide attendance improvement which is smaller than the improvement for transitional class children.

Attendance rates for transitional class children do remain slightly lower than for their schoolmates. This generalization is based on the comparison of transitional classes to other classes in the same school, by grade (See Table III).

TABLE I.

COMPARISON OF TRANSITIONAL CLASS STUDENTS' ATTENDANCE WITH THE ATTENDANCE OF THE SAME CHILDREN DURING THE PREVIOUS YEAR

SAMPLE SCHOOL	1977-78 ATTENDANCE RATE (1)	TRANSITIONAL CLASS ATTENDANCE RATE* (2)	DIFFERENCE (2)-(1)	GRADE LEVELS OF TRANSITIONAL CLASSES			
				1	2	3	Other**
1	64.98	82.11	17.13	1			
2	70.04	83.09	13.05				1 (1-2)
3	75.83	80.24	4.41				1 (1-2)
4	76.99	79.17	2.18	1	1		
5	77.31	85.93	8.62				1 (1-2)
6	78.07	87.62	9.55				1 (2-3)
7	78.51	85.58	7.07		2		
8	80.40	83.44	3.04	2	3	3	
9	80.51	84.00	3.49		1		
10	80.86	84.33	3.47				1 (1-2)
11	81.38	87.35	5.97	1			
12	81.86	81.80	-0.06		1	1	
13	82.24	87.07	4.83	1	1	2	
14	83.21	91.60	8.39				1 (1-2)
15	83.44	90.65	7.21	1	1		
16	84.26	83.80	-0.46	1			
17	86.94	88.74	1.80				1 (1-2)
18	87.17	89.79	2.62				1 (2-3)
19	87.18	90.61	3.43				1 (2-3)
20	87.37	89.70	2.31				1 (2-3)
21	87.51	89.02	1.52			2	
22	87.96	87.94	-0.02				1 (2-3)
23	88.88	88.69	-0.19				1 (2-3)
24	88.88	96.69	7.81				1 (1-2)
25	89.09	93.85	4.76				1 (2-3)
26	89.88	95.57	5.69				1 (1-2)
27	89.93	95.02	5.09		1	1	
28	89.97	92.14	2.17		1	1	
29	91.21	95.11	3.90		1		
30	91.81	87.64	-4.17			1	
31	92.53	91.61	-0.92				1 (3-4)
32	93.53	88.30	-5.23				1 (2-3)
33	94.04	93.74	-0.30	1			
MEANS	84.36	88.24	3.88				

*The transitional class attendance data cover the period from the start of each class to either January 30th or 31st, depending on which date the data were collected.

**These are mixed grade classes; the two grades are specified in parentheses.

Table II.

PERCENTAGE OF ATTENDANCE for GRADES 1, 2, and 3
(systemwide)
September through December for years, 1977-78 and
1978-79, and September through June, 1977-78.

Month	Grade 1		Grade 2		Grade 3	
	77-78	78-79	77-78	78-79	77-78	78-79
Sept.	85.0	87.7	86.8	89.3	87.5	90.0
Oct.	87.7	88.2	90.2	90.5	91.0	91.7
Nov.	86.4	86.1	89.4	89.7	90.2	90.6
Dec.	83.4	86.5	86.4	89.1	87.6	90.1
Sept. through Dec.	85.8	87.3	88.4	89.7	89.2	90.6
Sept. through June.	86.1	N/A	88.4	N/A	89.2	N/A

TABLE III.

COMPARISON OF ATTENDANCE OF TRANSITIONAL CLASS STUDENTS AND ALL STUDENTS ON THE SAME GRADE* IN SAMPLE SCHOOLS

	Period 1 (9/78)			Period 2 (10/78)			Period 3 (11/78)			Period 4 (12/73)		
	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
Transitional Classes	85.5	88.9	86.3	87.1	89.0	87.2	85.5	87.5	85.5	84.5	87.6	86.9
All Classes	90.2	89.8	89.9	89.7	90.9	90.0	87.2	88.7	89.8	86.9	89.1	88.9

* Data for the transitional classes include all children registered in these classes for the above periods. Data for all classes were obtained by averaging the attendance of all classes on the grade in those sample schools which had, during that period, a transitional class on that grade.

Program Implementation

In the first months of a new program, it is critical to determine whether the program is being implemented in a way likely to lead to success. Programs often do not attain their original goals because the actual program implemented in the field is often unrelated to the program design on paper. Successful programs have been flexible, and have benefitted from experience. But successful programs also show a strong commitment to their original goals and methods.

The information presented here about implementation of the Transitional Class Program draws from three sources: a survey of teachers conducted by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in October which had over 300 responses, a survey of parent association leaders conducted by the United Parents Association which had over 70 responses, and the continuing work of the Office of Educational Evaluation which has a special team assigned to the Transitional Class Program. The evaluation team has spent much of its time visiting schools to test out questionnaires and to become familiar with the program in order to design an evaluation procedure. Team members interviewed 13 principals, 25 transitional class teachers and 60 children, and observed 25 classes. As mentioned above, the team also coordinated a special data collection effort in January from a sample of 10% of the schools having transitional classes. All these sources agree that the Transitional Class Program is organized and fully operating.

According to October data, there are 480 transitional classes in 356 elementary schools. These serve nearly 8,000 pupils, or about a third of the holdovers in the first three grades. The average class size is 17, with a maximum of 20. (The average size in the sampled schools was 16.5.) All 32 districts are participating in the program in some fashion. Based on the sample data, slightly more than half of the schools have transitional classes which are composed of children from more than one grade (see Table 1).

One district, by permission of the Board, has continued its policy of "mainstreaming" educationally disadvantaged children, and has used the funding to reduce class size in the lower grades. Twenty-two of the districts created the same number of classes as the number of positions allocated by the Board. Five districts created more classes than monies given and five districts created fewer classes.

The per-pupil cost of the Transitional Class Program can be roughly estimated as follows: The average class size in the city is about 30. If the transitional classes were at the desirable size of 15, it would take two teachers instead of one to provide for 30 children. If a teacher costs $24,000 in salary and fringes, then 30 transitional class children would require $24,000 over their usual per-pupil expenditure. This is about $800 per-pupil, using that conservative estimating procedure. By comparison, a holdover pupil not in a transitional class would be likely to receive services through Title I, and, if limited-English-speaking, through Title VII. In 1977-78, Title I was estimated to provide an average of $467 per program participant (excluding special education pupils); Title VII provided an average of $389. Thus, the basic cost of the Transitional Class Program is comparable to the cost of the services provided to holdovers with limited knowledge of English, and somewhat greater than the cost of the program provided to other holdovers. In some districts, the cost of the Transitional Class Program exceeds the basic cost, because children in transitional classes are receiving some service through Title I, Title VII, and PSEN.

The UPA, UFT, and the evaluation team agree that most of the staff assigned to the transitional classes are well qualified to deal with young children with learning difficulties. There had been some concern that the new positions, created just before school opened, might be assigned to teachers who would otherwise have been laid off by the school or district for lack of seniority. In general, principals have given the classes to the more experienced teachers in their schools; the less experienced teachers recalled from lay-offs have been used in other ways.

One important aspect of the program is the appropriate placement of children into the transitional classes. Some principals have reserved transitional class places for "high potential" children, those with good chances of returning to grade level; others have placed children who seemed most in need of individualized attention. In some cases, the transitional class slots were filled with students who were in "danger of being held over".

Early in the implementation of the program, the program coordinators were alerted through the Hot-line and by district liaisons [illegible] some children with special education problems were inappropriately placed in transitional classes. The program coordinators made arrangements with the Office of Impartial Hearings to expedite the evaluative testing and the placement of these children, with parental approval, into special education classes.

Staff Development and Program Administration

As originally planned, a program of teacher training is in place and is coordinated by a small group at the Central Board. In addition, each district has assigned a staff member to act as liaison between the Board and the teachers in the district. It was felt that this arrangement was appropriate since the Board and the districts shared responsibility for the operation of this program. A certain amount of conflict is inherent in this arrangement; the Chancellor initiated the program and considers himself responsible for the outcome, while the districts are naturally protective of their leadership role in their schools. On the whole, a potentially divisive situation has been avoided and training has been provided for most teachers either by the Board or by the districts. Teachers attended up to four workshops at the beginning of the school year, and subsequent monthly workshops have been conducted in most districts. In response to teacher reactions and needs, more recent workshops have focused on material to be applied directly in the classroom.

Problems

Inevitably, the program, at present, is not in all respects the program it is intended to be. Late-starting programs face supply shortages, and many teachers desired additional instructional materials. Some districts have contributed funds for supplies and the Board allocated $75 per classroom in December. Parent involvement, which is a part of the program design, appears to be minimal in most districts; some, however, have had parent orientation and workshop meetings. Teachers want more support of various kinds, including more intensive training and para-professionals. It is possible that better coordination with other programs aimed at low-achieving children will ease some of these shortages. Finally, approximately 10,000 early grade holdovers remain unserved.

Conclusion

The Transitional Class Program has developed very much as planned, and it is favorably seen by all key groups at the present time. Its problems seem to be manageable. This is not faint praise; it is remarkable for a program this large to come into being so quickly, and with so little real difficulty and dissension. Clearly, the program is widely perceived as a very hopeful approach to an absolutely crucial problem. Attendance figures through January suggest that the program is responding to the needs of the holdover children.

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